

I. Timnah

1. A small boy from the valley

HOW DOES A man, or boy, become a hero? The first time Padi met Samson, years before the drought, Padi had followed his brother, Achish, down the grade below their father's lodge to a line of hidden caves. They met friends and played for hours there, running about and whipping each other's legs with sharp-edged reeds. But then, a small boy from the valley appeared standing near them, something unexpected, for the conquered sons of Avraham had learned to know their place.

Spying the intruder, Achish swore and hurled a rock. When Samson, much younger and smaller at that time, allowed the stone to strike his shoulder, not once flinching, Padi grinned.

Achish was a bully.

No boy had ever defied him, certainly none so small.

"Who are you?" Achish bellowed. "This is a Philistine ridge."

Samson tossed his hair behind his shoulders and stepped up face-to-face, or almost so, for Achish was easily a head taller, more massive and broader shouldered. Yet, Padi noticed with great curiosity that there was, undeniably, a certain lanky tautness to Samson's frame, a kind of rippling twitchiness that made one stop and stare.

"Who are you?" Achish yelled again.

Samson chose that moment, quickly becoming Padi's hero, to reveal one of the many, outrageous behaviors that eventually brought him fame. Never meeting Achish's eyes, the intruder from the valley tipped toward the older boy's shoulder and asked, in the perfect parlance of Ashdod, "What is always seen in water, yet is never wet?"

A riddle?

Padi laughed but the others frowned.

More fighter than thinker, Achish stood stupidly, undone, as did his dull-eyed friends. But as Padi raised his hand to offer a guess, Achish, having sorted out enough to take offense, brayed like a mule and raised a fist in anger. But what followed was no fight.

In a flash, there knelt Achish at Samson's feet, crying out in pain at least as often as he cursed. "Release me!" he grunted, more embarrassed than injured for, almost casually, Samson had clamped one hand on Achish's shoulder where it met his neck and, each time Achish squirmed, he squeezed harder to make him pay.

It was wonderful though over much too soon. "A reflection," Samson whispered as he let poor Achish go.

"I knew it!" Padi erupted, thrilled to have solved the riddle but, after Samson strolled away unchallenged, Achish threw him down, rubbed dirt in his eyes and stuck a small stick in his ear.

But Padi never stopped smiling. A boy from the valley, one of the weak-kneed sons of Avraham, had made the toughest boy on Padi's ridge break down and cry.

How could such a thing be possible?

Something important, it seemed certain, was about to change.

*

The Sorek Valley, as that broad swath of gentle earth below Padi's ridge was known, had long been run by Padi's people. Padi's father, Mitni, no longer content with life at Ekron, was among the first to venture farther inland to displace the natives, so-called sons of Avraham, a backward lot who honored one god and knew nothing of the sea.

Though Mitni stayed atop his conquered ridge, men from Ashdod and Gath built lodges below. Of course, feuds arose then, differences breed contempt, but the desperate violence between the two tribes began only after the rain stopped.

Down at the village, Timnah, where Padi and his boyhood chums once stole arm-loads of grapes, leeks and melons with no fear of retaliation, the wadi's once reedy bottom turned into windblown ruts.

So there began a time of trouble.

Men cannot live without rain.

Those with whom Padi's kin had once peacefully bowed to idols and intermarried, fell back upon their singular god, blaming whom they called *Philistines*, foreigners or wanderers, for the drought that

threatened their lives. But they could have as easily blamed their champion, Samson, for the drought grew worse as he grew fiercer.

At least Philistines saw it that way.

*

As Padi grew older he proved to be as poor a fit among his people as was Samson among his own; Padi for his meekness, Samson for his strength. Tabsal, Padi's mother, complained that he was born a *sigher*, inclined to whining as a child, dark moods and troubled breathing as a young adult. Those traits only annoyed his brother and few friends but prompted Mitni into fits. "We are the stock of seafaring warriors!" his father would bellow, kicking Padi's backside, "not hesitant cowards, stung by doubt."

"Stung by odd thoughts, I think," Tabsal corrected him one day, not to defend but to explain. "Our son reflects upon everything."

Mitni stood blinking, vacantly.

"It is a habit, husband," Tabsal explained, "in accord with his need to dwell on meaningless things. It's his burden, I'm afraid. I'm afraid that it's a curse."

"Behave differently," Mitni barked, kicking Padi again.

So Padi tried hard, at first, when young, to become less thoughtful, but weaknesses die slow deaths. Despite his warrior blood, he approached manhood gently, preferring romance to conflict and, though everyone mocked him, he fell in love with a village girl and, because he did, became entangled with mighty Samson for the remainder of his life.